

ECLECTIC REVIEW

The *ECLECTIC REVIEW* (monthly; 1805-1868) began as the organ of the Eclectic Society, a group that urged greater cooperation between the evangelical members of the Church of England and Protestant dissenters. During the first series (1805-1813) the guiding lights of the journal were Daniel Parken (editor, 1806-1811), John Foster (1770-1843), and the poet James Montgomery (1771-1854). In 1814 Josiah Conder (1789-1855) purchased the journal, began a new series, and set the liberal, enlightened tone of the Eclectic (with astringent advice from Foster) until he sold it in 1836 to devote his full attention to the *Patriot*, a liberal religious and political weekly newspaper. The general progress of the Eclectic Review is documented in biographies or memoirs of Conder, Foster, and Montgomery, and marked copies of some volumes now in the London Library have enabled John O. Hayden to identify many of the literary reviewers.

November 1807

Byron, *Hours of Idleness* (1807); *Eclectic Review*, III (Nov. 1807), 989-993. Byron called this review "a furious Philippic, not against the book but the author" and refers to the reviewer as a "reverend divine" (to R. C. Dallas, Jan. 20, 1808). We know nothing more of the critic than Byron did. The earlier profligate but repentent nobleman whose poetry outlives that of all other titled authors (p. 990) was John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester (1647-1680), who ended his life in religious discussions with Gilbert (later Bishop) Burnet.

Art. VII. *Hours of Idleness*, a Series of Poems, Original and Translated. By George Gordon, Lord Byron, a Minor. 8vo. pp. 190. Price 6s. bds. Longman and Co. 1807.

THE notice we take of this publication, regards the author rather than the book; the book is a collection of juvenile pieces, some of very moderate merit, and others of very questionable morality; but the author is a *nobleman*! It is natural that, as commoners, we should feel a solemn reverence for hereditary rank; and that as critics, we should hail the slightest indication of poetical talent that gleams from beneath a coro-

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net. Powerfully as we are actuated by these sentiments, we shall not suffer this superior dignity, or these unnatural symptoms of intellect, to overwhelm us with astonishment; but duly estimating that authority which our hoary age and important functions intitle us to assume, and reflecting on the juvenility of this adventurous lord, we shall furnish him with a few admonitions which he is not very likely to hear from any other quarter.

A modest preface announces the 'ambition' of our 'Minor,' as the origin of this "first and last" appearance before the literary world; it is at least a more respectable motive to alledge, than the urgent request of friends, and a more plausible one than the hope of benefiting some individual, a purpose which these poems cannot, at any rate, be expected to accomplish. It is gratifying, however, to find him not insensible to public opinion; the desire of fame is nearly at an equal distance from the noblest virtues and the meanest vices; if it be a proof that he has not attained the magnanimity of a moral hero, it may also be deemed a pledge that he has not enslaved himself to sordid pursuits and groveling sensuality. He has not yet discovered the way to true honour, but he evinces a disposition to seek it; and while we are endeavouring to render him some assistance, we shall be solaced with the consciousness of benevolent intention, if not with a very sanguine hope of success.

Any young man may write school exercises that shall escape censure; or he may be love-sick, and substantiate his reveries in rhyme; and at length may expose his weaknesses to the public. It is not by doing what every one else who is imprudent enough may do, that we should advise Lord Byron to solicit notoriety. He may indeed be a poet among lords, as he will be a lord among poets; but we are willing to think that he would not value himself on this adventitious distinction. Other noblemen, living and dead, have ventured to attract attention by publishing amatory verses, which happily escape from contempt, by sinking into obscurity. The only one of this class whose memory is not lost, or insulted, had ennobled by his penitence that title which he had dishonoured by his profligacy. We would not represent this publication, however, as consisting entirely of exceptionable pieces, or as destitute of merit. It exhibits considerable feeling and spirit, and a general facility of composition which few among the multitude of modern versifiers attain so early. But though several of the translations are strictly decorous, and many of the original poems refer to the harmless occupations and friendships of youth; yet the prominence which is given to voluptuous themes and visions, and the licentious manner in

which they are frequently celebrated, compel us to pronounce the volume itself unsuitable for any refined reader or well regulated family.

Lord Byron seems inclined to give up this "idle trade;" we applaud the resolution, and would encourage him to engage in pursuits that will not be wholly unproductive of honour to himself and advantage to society. If he would be truly illustrious, he must again desert the vulgar sphere of mediocrity, and the shackles of absurd custom,—but it must be for nobler purposes; let him step forward from the crowd among which his birth has cast him, to employ the respectable talents which he possesses for the public benefit, and to convert the notice which he has attracted, as a writer of verses, into esteem for his virtues as a man, and for his usefulness as a senator. But if he herds with the noble populace, he will be overlooked and forgotten with them; in the haunts of frivolous dissipation and the retirements of guilt, in the waste of time, and the degradation of riches, he cannot distinguish himself from the mob; he will be despised by his contemporaries, and unknown to posterity. Let him be a signal example, therefore, of sincerity, of fortitude, of patriotism; for there are no characters probably, which his young mind has learned more deeply to detest, than the hypocrite, the coward, and the traitor. Let him be boldly an infidel, or a serious Christian; if the Bible be true, let him acknowledge and obey it; if false, let him disown its authority, and make a manful effort to recover the world from so gross an imposture; among a throng of hypocritical unbelievers, let him resolve to wear no mask. This one resolution will instantaneously gratify his most anxious thirst for notoriety; whether he renounce, or embrace, the religion of his fathers, let him do it with fearless sincerity, and he will be generally known; he will be warmly admired,—on the one hand, by the dunces, the triflers, the blasphemers, and the libertines,—on the other, by the virtuous and the wise. If he has any of the courage that has been ascribed to noble blood, it needs not long remain undiscovered and inactive; to be upright, moral, humane, and religious, in spite of scoffs and ridicule, is the extreme test of intrepidity; and if he really merits admiration, he will be sure to incur reproach. If he affects the honours of patriotism, (without which a peerage is ignominious), let him obey the laws of his country, let him reverence her institutions, let him watch for her prosperity: a long and busy life might be employed, in ascertaining her interests, and vindicating her rights; in denouncing the tyrannical who oppress her citizens, the factious who disturb her peace, the plunderers who fatten on her wealth, and the venal who betray her liberties.

Many are the actions and situations of life, in which all these principles should excite our youthful peer to honourable singularity. There is much vice for him to discountenance, much injustice to redress, much misery to relieve, much virtue to encourage and succour. The most despicable of men may squander thousands at a gaming table, may expose himself as a walker, a boxer, and a sot, or attain a place in the Calendar of Newmarket; will Lord Byron disclaim all these dirty distinctions, and be known in the lists of Charity, to restore the dying, to reclaim the vicious, to impart health, comfort, and instruction to the destitute, that "the blessing of them who were ready to perish may come upon him?" It is nothing to defend an aggression, or revenge an insult, by murder; will Lord Byron have the courage to forgive an affront, or refuse a challenge? Will he demonstrate his superior and independent spirit, by refraining from any of the vices which the code of his country has prohibited, and the fashion of its nobility enjoins? Will he even respect the weekly institution which so many centuries have rendered venerable, which the greatest and wisest men have honoured, and which the constitution of Britain maintains as ingrafted into its being, and indispensable to its welfare? After this warning, there will be eyes enough upon Lord Byron, beside our own; and a voice within him will speak louder than a thousand public monitors.

We are astonished that this young man should so completely renounce all pretensions to justice and decency, as to stigmatize the most exemplary men in one of our Universities, by the term of "a Methodistic crew," and pretend to search their hearts, and discern "pride of spirit" in their "self-denial." We are not so much surprised at the paganism of the first couplet in the following extract, because it is very evident that Lord B. has not yet imbibed any tinge of Christian truth.

A FRAGMENT.

When, to their airy hall, my fathers' voice
 Shall call my spirit, joyful in their choice;
 When, pois'd upon the gale, my form shall ride,
 Or, dark in mist, descend the mountain's side;
 Oh! may my shade behold no sculptur'd urns,
 To mark the spot, where earth to earth returns:
 No lengthen'd scroll of virtue and renown;
 My epitaph shall be, my name alone:
 If that with honour fail to crown my clay,
 Oh! may no other fame my deeds repay;
 That, only that, shall single out the spot,
 By that remember'd, or with that forgot.' p. 9.

1803.

Unless his "ambition" be a puerile dream, or grasps at no higher honours to discriminate him from the mass, than those of a rhymester, Lord Byron is here solemnly pledged to signalize himself. He is right enough in saying, "I have passed the Rubicon;" he cannot be quite forgotten, for he has written a book; it depends on his future life to be respected or contemned.